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Booze, Boobs, Cigars, and Boxing: Fight Night in DC

The annual charitable event was over-the-top fun and raised more than \$2 million for underprivileged children.

By Carol Ross Joynt



A Fight Night tradition is a performance by the Redskins cheerleaders. The choreography was more sexually charged than their routines performed at FedEx field. Ditto the costumes. Photograph by Jeff Martin.

For the past several years, many of Washington's most charitable women have gathered at the Ritz-Carlton West End for the annual Knock Out Abuse dinner, which raises money on behalf of victims of domestic violence. The women come dressed to the nines, principally for each other, because the men are across town at the Washington Hilton at their own black-tie fundraiser, Fight Night. After several years of attending the women's dinner, which is one of Washington's splashiest nights, we decided to check out what the men had going on and whether it was splashier. Well, splashy may be too small a word to describe the over-the-top goings on. There's premium booze in good supply, ample cleavage, Redskins cheerleaders wearing far less than they do at a game, cigars, whopping 16-ounce steaks, a light show, MC Hammer, and a boxing match.

"It gives men a night to be men, to pursue their own interests," said philanthropist **Jack Davies**. "You'll see that what goes on is more PG than G." Davies is one of the founders of AOL and also a supporter of Fight Night since 1990, when it was created by his friend, the late **Joe Robert**, to give back to the community he got his humble start in before becoming a rich man. Robert created Fight for Children, the nonprofit that hosts Fight Night, to raise funds to help low-income children in DC. Since its start it has leveraged more than \$450 million for various programs, and before he died from brain cancer last December, Robert pledged another \$5 million. Davies viewed that as Robert's investment in the group's future. Davies commended another of Robert's friends and his own business partner, **Raul Fernandez**, for picking up where Robert left off. "Raul decided he would give it his best effort" to keep Fight Night viable, says Davies. He referred to Thursday night's gala as a "test," since it was the first Fight Night since Robert's death. Robert's son **Joseph E. Robert III** was the evening's honorary chairman.

Because it is a night of men being men, the cocktail hour had no boundaries. The cocktail food alone would have been a sufficient dinner, and it's worth noting the lamb chops disappeared though the crudité remained mostly intact. The bars were overstocked with premium brands of bourbon, Scotch, vodka, gin, and rum. The VIP reception, which began at 6, rolled into the Hilton's ballroom around 7:30, where an hour later men were still standing, back-slapping, table-hopping, and lighting up cigars, reveling in the testosterone-fueled camaraderie. Each table had its own humidor filled with cigars, as well as its own "hostess," a young woman hired for the evening to serve as a gofer for drinks and to light cigars—a table geisha, really.

The hostesses were paid \$30 an hour and could accept tips, but had to pay for their own hair and makeup and long evening dresses, which ranged in style from understated and elegant to sparkly pageant wear; all, of course, with bare arms and daring décolletage. One hostess, working her first Fight Night, said she is a DC-based model who was recruited for the event. She was enthusiastic about the evening, hoped she would meet boxing legend **Sugar Ray Leonard**, and had to resist the urge to break out into dance to the cover band muscling through a predictable top-20 playlist. (Yes, that means "Gangnam Style.")

Many of the conversations were about Robert and his legacy, and what he did to build the organization. Whenever the discussion turned to the first dinner, one man or another brought up sports writer Christine Brennan. Depending on the talker, she was portrayed as either the witch to be burned at the stake or the figurehead on the prow of their ship. She covered the first dinner for the *Washington Post* and gave the evening a scathing review, mocking the men for the very elements of the evening for which they were most proud: the garish, sex-romp splendor of it all. What she wrote got under their skin. "It was nasty and mean. She was sour grapes," said one man. "But," said another, "because of her story, the next year the dinner sold out in two weeks. She was a great thing in the end." And so, it has always sold strong, but the numbers of women invited to attend as guests is kept to a limited few.

The old-timers in particular enjoyed reminiscing about the early years of Fight Night. **Michael Murphy** recalled that in the first year the hostesses were hired "from a variety of places," which he said with eyebrows raised and a knowing wink. Over the years that component of the evening got upgraded. He explained that when Robert married Jill Sorensen, that was the beginning of Knock Out Abuse, which started as a small dinner at Cafe Milano in 1993. "Jill needed validation," he said—but the event is still going strong and raising lots of money. Murphy said he had been to most of the Fight Night dinners. We asked if he thought it could survive without Robert. "Yes," he said. "Joe set it up as an institution."

It wouldn't be a Washington fundraiser without silent and live auction items. The silent auction items played to the male crowd: a jersey and a helmet signed by Washington Redskins quarterback Robert Griffin III, a framed assortment of signed memorabilia from Washington Nationals star Bryce Harper, a signed swim cap from Olympic champion Michael Phelps, and a framed US flag and collage with the autographs of Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter. There was a "one full week lease of a luxurious Bentley V8," for which bidding started at \$5,000.

The priciest item in the live auction was a motorcycle, which went for \$100,000. But probably the most intriguing item was a weekend trip to Academi, a private security training facility in North Carolina formerly known as Blackwater USA. Three separate weekend trips went for \$40,000 each. Overall the evening raised \$2.2 million, up by \$100,000 from last year.

In addition to raising money for disadvantaged children, the evening's theme was boxing. Legends of the sport were on hand, including Leonard, **Gerry Cooney**, **Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini**, **Michael Spinks**, **James "Buster" Douglas**, **Larry Holmes**, and **Pernell "Sweet Pea" Whitaker**. The three boxing matches included a local fighter, light heavyweight **Greg Newby** of DC, who won his bout with Baltimore's **Tacuna Farmer** in a knockout.

But before the boxing began, the ring was filled with Redskins cheerleaders, who, as promised by Jack Davies, put on a performance that was more PG than G. They were dressed for Vegas and not FedEx Field, and the audience approved—loudly. In a haze of spotlights and smoke they bumped and whipped their hair, and then were joined by **MC Hammer**, who had no hair to whip but did reliably deliver his signature “U Can’t Touch This” while mixing it up in the ring with the Redskinettes and his own dancers. They did most of the dancing, and he did the star turn with a few leg moves thrown in for good measure.

And only then did the audience sit down and begin to cut into their iceberg lettuce salad, 16-ounce broiled New York strip steak, and Granny Smith apple pie with caramel sauce. Raul Fernandez boasts next year will be better than ever with Under Armour founder **Kevin Plank** as Fight Night chairman. “We’re going to take it to a new level.” But for now he feels the first year without Joe Robert passed the test. “I was ecstatic,” he said Friday morning. “The energy was incredible, an incredible tribute to Joe, a great bridge to the future. And I’m a big MC Hammer fan. He’s 50 and he moved like he was 20.”